John M. Buchanan, Pastor

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

February 8, 1999

Ms. Laura C. Gidding
8319 Woodland Drive, Apt. E
Darien, IL 60561

Dear Ms. Gidding,

Thank you for your letter. I found your description of your spiritual journey fascinating, and I'm so pleased that my words on *Thirty Good Minutes* last week connected. I'm also glad that you identified with the Viktor Frankl citation. He is one of my favorites, as well.

I think you certainly are on the right track in responding to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit in your life. I was pleased to read that you have joined Community Presbyterian Church in Clarendon Hills, and I strongly urge you to be in touch with the pastor there, the Reverend Christian Chakoian. Chris is a good friend of mine, and I think you would have much to gain from a personal conversation with her about your journey.

I also was interested to note your application to McCormick Seminary.

It sounds as though important things are beginning to happen in your life, and I do hope that you will remain open to your call to vocation, however and whenever it comes.

Thank you for taking the time to write, and every good wish to you.

Yours faithfully,

John M. Buchanan

copy to Chris Chakoian

The Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago 126 East Chestnut Street Chicago IL 60611.2094 phone 312.7874570 fax 312.7874584

8319 Woodland Drive, Apt. E
Darien, Illinois 60561

February 2, 1999

Rev. John Buchanan
Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street
Chicago, Illinois 60611-2094

Dear Rev. Buchanan,

As a former employee of a public television station in San Jose, California, I was surprised to view a religious program on my local public television station here in Illinois last Sunday. Such programs were not broadcast by the San Jose station. But my astonishment was transformed to awe as I listened to your sermon.

Since returning to the church in 1996, I have come to recognize God at work in my life through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Coincidence is the common label used by the unenlightened. What others brush off as coincidence, I know to be sacred stirrings. Clues dropped in my path.

It seemed as though the words you spoke on last Sundays "30 Good Minutes" were catered for my ears. The affirmation came when you quoted Viktor E. Frankl. "Man's Search for Meaning" was one of the first books I read after beginning a personal relationship with God. Frankl's powerful testimony still serves as the most poignant I have read regarding the purpose of hope and love.

As you spoke about the calling to serve God and the importance in answering that call, I reflected on my own calling. A copy of my personal testimony is enclosed for you. It seems that God has gifted me to serve people in times of grief and doubt. I am drawn to this work, and it is deeply fulfilling.

Presently, I volunteer a few hours each week with St. Thomas Hospice and offer part time support to the Riverside Presbyterian Church. But I long to serve others as a full time ministry, and I am quickly approaching a crossroad as my last day working for the Riverside church, February 12, draws closer. This crossroad is an opportunity.

Yet, the form of my ministry remains a mystery at present. I'm half tempted to begin offering individual and group grief support here in Darien privately. Perhaps my recent decision to attend the Community Presbyterian Church in Clarendon Hills will lead to opportunities. I have decided to attend their next Stephen Ministry training program. I have also submitted my application to the M.Div. program at McCormick Theological Seminary.

I continue to pray that God will guide me so that I may use His gifts to serve others. If, after reading this letter, my path remains as mysterious to you as it is to me, we can be content to let the letter serve as an affirmation of your ministry.

However, should this letter stir any thoughts that you deem helpful to my search, please do not hesitate to call or write.

Thank you.

Grace and peace,

Laura C. Gidding
(630) 325-1130

Enclosure

Personal Testimony

Laura C. Gidding

Loss and the process of loss, grief, led me to my current ministry. Loss causes us to define our faith, to dig deep down within ourselves to find the answer to the relentless question—"Does life exist beyond this tangible realm?"

Loss is an opportunity as much as an avoided and misunderstood aspect of life. Resistance to accept loss results in stagnation. Ideally, loss will increase in significance with age, preparing us for pivotal loss that begs the question, "Is there something beyond this tangible world?" Eventually, loss tests our faith.

Where is God in the midst of profound anguish? Loss leads us to begin gathering information, asking questions and seeking answers. The question is the catalyst that ignites the burning fire—the pain we feel as our illusions of tangible permanence are destroyed. This is how our faith is cast into a custom experience that prepares us for life beyond our physical existence.

For some, though, significant losses precede minor losses or come at an early age. A child dies before the parent. A brother dies before a grandparent. The former was the experience of my mother and father; the latter was mine at the age of 16.

The hallways of my high school offered little comfort. What did death and dying have to do with dating and driving? I felt terribly isolated. Numb. Yet, support did come. The high school nurse took it upon herself to form a support group made up of my peers. We connected through our experiences of loss. Though different in form, our losses all shared the same substance.

The loss of my brother and the support I received planted a seed in me. But the seed lay dormant for many years.

I took it on faith that my Brother Nick's soul now existed in heaven. But it was the faith of my parents, not my own—a required practice until my confirmation in the Catholic Church at the age of 14. After meeting this obligation, I was given the option to stay or walk. I walked.

Twenty years passed. My life outside the church was limited to the superficial world around me. I sought fulfillment in material things and from a marriage that was created outside the church. My marriage ended in divorce in 1996. The loss brought me to my knees, and uncovered a question I had ignored for far too long. I surrendered my illusion of control, and my quest for faith ensued.

I began to dig for answers. My life began to be reshaped, as did my perception. There was evidence of some force at work in my life. Order was restored where chaos had ruled. Fragments began to connect. People came to me offering validation and affirmation—nutrients that nurtured the seed planted so long ago.

I encountered Janet Childs. As a voice for The Centre for Living with Dying in Santa Clara, California, she seemed to speak to me personally while addressing a group of my coworkers during a United Way campaign in 1995. The following year, I attended a volunteer inquiry meeting. It led to a two-year relationship with the Centre.

The experience brought me full circle. I came to sit in the chair that my high school nurse had sat in back in 1980 and share the gift I had received with others. The seed rooted by her actions, became a young, strong and nimble, yet naïve, tree.

That tree would gain direction under the guidance of two individuals, a husband and wife ministerial team—Reverends Nancy and Steve Harrington of The Presbyterian Church of Sunnyvale.

At the coaxing of a friend, shortly after my marital separation, I attended an informal Sunday evening service called Intersections. Though many other people attended, Steve and Nancy seemed to speak directly to me. Their message resonated, and I found a church home of my own. Within a few months, I became a congregational member as well as a staff member of The Presbyterian Church of Sunnyvale.

I came to know Christ on a personal level. All of the obligatory memories of my Catholic upbringing finally made sense. Forgiveness transformed my pain. Ultimately, I came to forgive the man who killed my brother.

Through my faith, I experience a spiritual life that exists concurrently with the physical. Loss is the bridge that connects the two. I would like to share this bridge with others who seek it. Seeing loss as an opportunity and testifying for the gift it has to offer, I wish to support others as they seek their own answers.

Currently, I pursue my ministry as a volunteer with the St. Thomas Hospice agency. Such work is fulfilling in a deeply satisfying way.

Kathleen Norris captures the allure of a personal calling in her book *Cloister Walk*. "None of us can understand what possible use we are in the world; it's one of the deeper mysteries. Rarely, grace comes to us in the form of another person who tells us we have been of help. But usefulness is not something we can know, or claim, for ourselves; I suspect that to have it as a goal of one's religious life would engage a person with mystery in tantalizing ways."

May God continue to guide us as we strive to answer His call to serve.